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Quackery ... The Billion Dollar Miracle Business

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QUACKERY ...The Billion Dollar **MIRACLE** Business

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This year, we Americans will spend billions of dollars on products that do nothing for us—or may even harm us. And we'll do it for the same reason people have done it since ancient times . . . we want to believe in miracles. We want to find simple solutions and shortcuts to better health.

It's hard to resist. All of us, at one time or another, have seen or heard about a product—a new and exotic pill, device, or potion—that can easily solve our most vexing problem. With this product, we're told, we can eat all we want and still lose weight. We can grow taller or build a bigger bustline. Or we can overcome baldness, age, arthritis, even cancer.

It sounds too good to be true—and it is. But we're tempted to try the product in spite of all we know about modern medical science—or perhaps *because* of it. After all, many treatments we take for granted today were once considered miracles. How can we tell the difference?

Separating Facts From Fantasy

Not all advertisements for health products are false, of course. In fact, the vast majority aren't. So just what is quackery? Simply put, *quackery is the promotion of a medical remedy that doesn't work or hasn't been proven to work.* In modern times, quackery is known as health fraud. But call it quackery or call it health fraud, the result is the same—unfulfilled wishes, wasted dollars, endangered health.

Often quack products are fairly easy to spot, like the magic pills you are supposed to take to stay forever young. But sometimes the products are vaguely based on some medical report that you may even have heard about in the news.

In general, when looking over ads for medicines and medical devices, watch out for those that seem to promise too much too easily. And investigate, before you participate.

The High Price of Health Fraud

Quack cures rob us of more than money. They can steal health away or even take lives. Quacks may lure the seriously and often desperately ill, such as people suffering from arthritis and cancer, into buying a bogus cure. When people try quack remedies instead of getting effective

medical help, their illnesses progress, sometimes beyond the treatable stage.

Today's Targets for Quack Attacks

Quacks have always been quick to exploit current thinking. The snake-oil salesmen a few generations back carried an array of "natural" remedies to sell to a public that was still close to the frontier. And today, quacks take advantage of the back-to-nature movement, capitalizing on the notion that there ought to be simple, natural solutions to almost any problem. Some current target areas for such promotions include:

Arthritis. Over 30 million Americans suffer from arthritis, and the nature of the disease makes it fertile ground for fraud. And because symptoms may come and go, or the disease may be in remission for several years, arthritis sufferers may actually believe, at least temporarily, that they've been cured by a quack remedy.

Before you add to the \$2 billion spent annually on quack arthritis cures, remember that, although medical science offers effective treatments, it has found no cure for arthritis. The list of fraudulent "miracle cures" for the disease ranges from snake venom to lemon juice, from the harmless milk of vaccinated cows to the dangerous use of steroids. More dangerous and costly arthritis treatments are offered by legitimate-looking clinics, often located outside the United States. While some clinics may offer effective treatment, many prescribe untested diets or drugs that either offer no arthritis cure or cause patients to have additional health problems. Beware of arthritis clinics that offer cures.

It is important to remember that pain relief and inflammation treatments are not the same. A product that advertises relief for the minor pains of arthritis does not necessarily treat inflammation. For this reason, the serious condition of arthritis should be treated by a doctor.

Fitness. Quacks know that people would like to have the benefits of exercise without actually exercising. So recent years have brought all sorts of "body toning" devices, such as electrical muscle stimulators. Such devices are, of course, worthless for "body toning" and can even be dangerous, but they're advertised and sold as substitutes for exercising.

Weight Loss. These schemes are probably the most popular form of quackery. Millions seek a painless way to win the battle of the bulge. Since

proper diet and exercise take constant discipline and work, quack claims are especially appealing and, to some, worth a try. But quick weight-loss products aren't worth a try when they affect your health and harm you, and they can harm you if only by not helping you. Being overweight can lead to number of health problems, including high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke, and kidney disease.

The fact is that you cannot lose weight if you do not cut down on the amount of food you eat or exercise more to burn up calories. Any product claim that promises to trim you down and tone you up effortlessly is false. Consult your doctor before beginning any diet program, and remember, there are no medicines or devices that will let you lose weight effortlessly.

Cancer. Here quack cures are probably the cruelest and the most expensive. Seriously ill people may spend thousands of dollars on phony treatments that do nothing to relieve their disease or suffering. Often, the quack cancer treatment clinics are set up just outside the United States, so that they're beyond the jurisdiction of U.S. authorities. Before you request admission to any cancer clinic, talk to your doctor about it.

As an aid in evaluating cancer-cure claims, keep in mind that there is no one device or remedy capable of diagnosing or treating all types of cancer. Cancer cannot be detected or treated solely through the use of machines. No one medical test conducted one time can definitively diagnose cancer, nor can a machine operated by a fraudulent practitioner cure it.

Quack Advertising—The Need for Healthy Skepticism

Many people believe that advertising is screened by a government agency and that, therefore, all claims about health products in advertising must be truthful. This is not the case with most health-care products, except for those drugs and medical devices that require pre-market approval by FDA. There is no federal, state or local government agency that approves or verifies claims in advertisements *before* they are printed. Law enforcement authorities can take action only after the advertisements have appeared.

This holds for claims of a "money-back guarantee." Many quacks are fly-by-night operators who do not respond to refund demands. Often, by the time refund requests come in, they have changed their address to avoid law enforcement officials.

Beware of Testimonials That Sound Too Fantastic to Be True

Health fraud promoters are fond of using testimonials from "satisfied users" to promote their wares. One reason they do this is that they can't get ethical health professionals to sanction their products. Legitimate testimonials may be useful sources of information about how a product works. However, beware of testimonials reporting incredibly fantastic medical results, especially when no medical support for the claim is offered. This is particularly important since "satisfied users" may, in some cases, have experienced the sugar pill, or "placebo," effect. The placebo effect occurs when people, believing they have been given a real medicine, experience a benefit from it. It is the power of suggestion at work.

You Can Protect Yourself

Apply the "it-sounds-too-good-to-be-true" test to ads for health products by watching for these common characteristics of quackery:

- A quick and painless cure.
- A "special," "secret," "ancient," or "foreign" formula, available only through the mail and only from one supplier.
- Testimonials or case histories from satisfied users as the only proof that the product works.
- A single product effective for a wide variety of ailments.
- A scientific "breakthrough" or "miracle cure" that has been held back or overlooked by the medical community.

Invest Your Time Before You Invest Your Money

Before buying a suspect product or treatment, find out more about it. Check with one or more of the following:

- your doctor, pharmacist, or other health professional
- the Better Business Bureau
- your local consumer office
- your state's Attorney General
- the Federal Trade Commission, Washington, D.C. 20580
- your nearest office of the Food and Drug Administration
- your Postmaster or the Postal Inspection Service.